Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

NICHOLAS W. MISKEY

BFA (University of Victoria, 2016)

“Elusive Quartet, Imaginary Songs: Understanding and Experiencing the Music of Morton Feldman and Helge Sten”

School of Music

Tuesday, August 18, 2020
1:00pm
Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Joseph Salem School of Music, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Kirk McNally, School of Music, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Paul Walde, Department of Art History and Visual Studies, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Gary Kuchar, Department of English, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Many commentators experience difficulties describing and analyzing Morton Feldman's String Quartet no. 2 (1983), implying that the quartet eludes stable ascriptions of meaning. Feldman's own philosophy frames these difficulties as symptoms of antagonism between direct experience and posthoc understanding of music, a dichotomy tacitly supported in much related discourse. I critique this proposed rift between understanding and experience by analyzing how String Quartet no. 2 prompts listeners to repeatedly reconsider their own experiences. Obfuscated instrumentation, transformations of repeated phrases, and disorienting formal returns challenge one's perception, pattern recognition, and musical memory, leading audiences to return to linguistic interpretation in an effort to comprehend what they hear. Drawing on writing by Lawrence Kramer, I show that the compulsion to voice these uncertainties is not a result of a separation of understanding and experience, but of the blurring of these categories.

Vacillation between close listening and interpretation also typifies experiences of the music of Helge Sten, produced under the pseudonym Deathprod. For the album Imaginary Songs from Tristan da Cunha (1996), Sten transfers recorded violin improvisations to wax phonograph cylinders, clouding attributions of the music's manner of production. Incorporating Brian Kane's theory of acousmatic sound, I demonstrate that the resultant spacing of sound and source provokes listeners to oscillate between attending to the music's material properties and struggling to identify its meaning and cause.

Work by Jonathan Sterne indicates that historical techniques of hearing associated with the antiquated medium of the phonograph cylinder prolong and complicate this mode of listening. As with Feldman's quartet, auditors of Imaginary Songs endlessly fluctuate between attempting to understand and striving to listen closely to the music.